

Tales of the Kimberley.

Let me sing you a song of The Kimberley. It is an ancient ballad, with at least two billion verses layered up on top of one another. Sometimes pressure has tilted them over, up, sideways, even creased the pages into folds and tears. Water has got at the limestone in them causing gashes, sometimes blurring the lines, sometimes raising them up into the sky.

The Kimberley song sheet has smashed into the Indian raga from the time Gondwanaland set its three babies loose and continues today, causing the verses to rear up into massive table lands. This is where we are—standing on masses of shell and fossils turned into limestone interspersed with iron sands. A Devonian Uplift. A primeval place. A place of dreaming.

The Kimberley is a tone poem in red. With hues of ochre, rust, magenta, orange, crimson, iron, cherry, cerise, and blood. Sandstone ground into dust, held together by dry and gravity, cemented into layers of colour. There is little or no humus. Water runs down-hill willy nilly with nowhere to escape other than to be soaked up by the heat and the sun. Underneath the red is limestone with fossils and fissures hollowed out by dripping water. White outcrops in the red landscape. Rains bring floods, water courses flash from dust dry to blood red with surging water seeking down where. This is the Wet. For three months, the monsoon creates a flooded havoc of red mud and slurry. And then slow evaporation to dust dry, blood red, maybe some flowers. In the daytime withering heat, at night bitter cold and clear skies.

And black. Black from the fires which have been lit in the autumn for so long that much of the vegetation is dependent on it for propagation. The fires burn the undergrowth so that it will not mix with the canopy of precious trees for if it did, fire would consume the lot.

After the fires, new growth. Spinifex comes bounding back, thrusting up to propagate, covering the ground where it can to build its own little micro-climate, forming hummocks of spiky grass, green and blue-grey, their prickly leaves easily broken and left in skin to fester, their seeds gathered to be pounded into seed cake, their sap to make glue for spears.

The hero of this epic ring cycle is water, slicing its way through sandstone and limestone over billions of years, creating the narrowest of gorges where shade permits pools to remain during the Dry, encouraging life. Whilst beyond the gorge the chunky dry savannah ekes a living, termites grazing at top speed to gather the wood and roots and grasses to chew on to build their mounds to protect their babies from marauders in the night. Ochre soil, ochre mounds—red-brown soil, red-brown mounds.

In the gorges, birds-corellas, cockatoos, robins, budgies. In the savannah, crows and hawks, dingoes, echidnas. And flies—seeking moisture, any moisture, from eyelids, and nostrils, earholes and lips, with a persistence that defines needy.

The bark of the blood-wood gums, snappy gums and sandalwood trees all singed by fire, black with green shoots sticking out in rejuvenation, shiny narrow leaves giving away as little as possible, straggling, occasional in clumps. And in between, red silence.

Outcrops of white rear and disappear just as abruptly, a range from nowhere goes somewhere for a bit and stops. For this is a song without rhyme, no two outcrops or ranges or gorges or creek beds or slopes are matched couplets. It is also without rhythm—a random landscape lost in vastness pushed up in crazy paving.

I listen to it. A hint of breeze through tree leaves. A crow, craak, singular in a cloudless sky. A waiting sound, the voice of patience, endless.

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The Grey Nomads.

Canada has its snowbirds who drive to Arizona for the winter. New Yorkers go to Key West. The Brits head to the Quercy or the Dordogne. The Scandies head to the Cote d'Azur or Croatia, the Parisians to Provence. But it is the Aussies who do it by 4WD and rough it in the bush—well, roughing it in a 2014 kinda way. They call themselves the Grey Nomads. Hell, they've even got their own website! Their average age is me and I am one of them.

Round about the end of May, the nomads stir in their hidey holes and start making preparation for their migration to the North. Blinking in the colder mornings of mid-June, they stock their little houses, packing their gear in a special way so everything fits. The packing is on roof-racks, in trailers, in camping caravans, in 4WD caravans and trailers, on trays and well-side decks. As they pull out from Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane they trundle along the interstates, gathering numbers in search of a warmer sun. By July the grey tide surges northwards in a flood for the sun.

Their vehicles are mostly newish, mostly Toyota Land Cruisers, but there are also Toyota Hiluxes with specialist camping gear on their backs, this reserved for the most adventurous.

The tide washes up the interstates on sealed highways to stay in caravan parks attached to the Roadhouses, arriving en masse daily between four and five pm, shedding their shells which transform into tents. This is resting up only, refuelling bodies and vehicles, and then onwards next day after the sun is up. No-one travels at night or at dawn—too many kangaroos and cattle crossing the roads. Too many road trains for that matter.

Up the Stuart Highway from South Australia, past Alice, on up to Katherine and over to Kunanurra on the Savannah Way into the Kimberley, if they want to stay on the blacktop. From Brisbane they travel the Savannah Way through the Channel Country and then on to the Kimberley. The tougher ones with the right gear turn off at Boulia and travel the Plenty Highway, 500 kms of road-train-ridden dust, and then over the Tanami Track, another 1,000kms which is 80% red rock and sand through to Halls Creek. Rough and dusty but the fastest way to the Kimberley. Drive for six hours, camp up, rest up, seven days from Adelaide.

Barry and Kathy, from Rockhampton are on their second month of traveling and are working their way their way home to Queensland via the Gibb. They've been right around the bottom end this time—across the Nullabor. They have a swim with us in the waterhole at Mt Hart Homestead, even though Barry's leg is a bit dicey. Kathy joins him and squeals due to the cold water but they stay in for a while. He is a retired a smashie and owned his own panel shop up till a couple of years ago. Now they camp for six to eight months, got all the gear in their camp trailer, cook their bread in a camp oven. Barry and Kathy are now heading back to Rocky to look after the business while their son takes a break. They will go via the Tanami and the Plenty but they're not in much of a hurry. At Walardi Camp in the Bungle Bungles a week later, Barry pads over in the same shorts, singlet and thongs. We share a couple of beers. We expected to see them at Wolfe Creek, on the Tanami. Kathy was keen, but it looks like Barry decided to put a big day in.

Up the Great North Highway from Perth, 3200kms to Kunanurra, rolling up the road, not exactly a convoy, but often three or four packages travelling together, and always two or three a minute if you are going the other way. By early July the grey tide has taken over the highway heading North, with road trains making up the rest of the traffic.

From Broome north they start to slow down, their stops longer, their camps more permanent—for the nomads have reached the warmth. Now they can put their feet up and rest their bunions. It may be the largest annual migration of humans in modern times, a form of trans-humance, leaving the comfort of their southern homes to graze in the comfort of their mobile ones in search of the sun.

There is also a slightly smaller wave of those who just want to go bush, Aussie style. This means a package on the tray or trailer which opens up to a cabin. It means two spare tires, and a full set of belts and high-rise jacks and winches. They often sleep under the stars in their green swags, and cook on campfires with Dutch ovens. This seems to be hard wired into the Aussie-boomer psyche. They sneak out to Roadhouses in the middle of nowhere to restock with diesel and grog and fresh tucker and then retreat back into the bush for another month or so. They travel in small convoys of three or four and meet up each night around the bucket fire, logs that they have scavenged blazing in the cold air.

A group of three outback double-axle caravans with their own satellite dishes are circled up at Mambi Island on the Parry Creek Road alongside the Ord River. They are from the Hunter Valley. It is mid-June and they are well settled in. Two of the three men are fishing for barra in their little tinnies, the women chat and watch the soaps. Washing on the line strung between two caravans. The campsite shows the scars of the Wet, when the river extended a further ten metres or so higher than it is now. Then the river would have been more than a kilometre wide. Now it is a hundred metres across and the campsite is dusty river-sand. The campers have left enough comfort room for crocs, so are well back from the banks. There is space for more campers, but this lot have been the early June-birds this year. They will stay until September. The women will go into Kunanurra or Wyndham every couple of weeks to stock up. Diesel is seventy cents a litre cheaper in Wyndham, and once you work out how its General Store works, the prices aren't bad there either.

The grey nomads have time on their hands. They are in no hurry as they know they have until September to think about ebbing South again to a cooler and dryer summer. Mostly they are on the move, but slowly. The Visitor Book at Mt Hart Homestead says it all.

'Gold Coast Galahs—Shorty and Pam, Lynne and Boz, Mike and Pat. Came for an overnight—stayed for five wonderful days. Thanks so much, Brian and Julia. Mt Hart is a gem. Heading slowly to Drysdale River Station for two weeks.'

There is also a Golden Tide, the young with their young, with two or three kids, usually 4-12 yrs. Some just bugger off for a month earlier than the July holidays to make it two months. Others take their kids out of school for much longer to travel Australia. It is a hardy tradition and to be encouraged. Kids get home-schooled and learn about their country, how to thrive in it, how to survive in it. I don't know how their parents get the time off to do these voyages, but I am full of admiration for their priorities.

At Fitzroy Crossing a boy and a girl, maybe six and eight, on scooters. They have taken over the sealed strip around the caravan park's central service block. Round and round, round and round, racing. A whistle brings them to a reluctant stop about two circuits later. A straggle back to their campers—two of them parked close together. Table and chairs under the awning. Nana handing out the books and the work folders. 'But it's Sunday, Nana!' 'I know, dear, so today it is a bible story. Just a short one, then you can do your diary.' Number plates are from Tasmania. Three generations on a voyage of discovery.

Savannah Country

This is Savannah country, where grasslands are dotted with stunted canopy trees or shrubs at irregular distances. Spinifex at the lowest level, grasses in between, trees or shrubs denoting a little more water hanging around for a longer spell after the Wet. Continuous canopy cover suggests a creek bed that still holds water down below. Add to the Kimberley the boab tree, a succulent with a woody pulpy centre, holding large quantities of water—its roots tasting like water chestnuts, its leaves good in a salad, its seeds edible and high in vitamin C, its nutshells carve-able, its bulk providing shelter and a landmark or meeting point for travellers. Some of them are huge, with girths of thirty metres.

No two boabs are the same. They have squat grey bottoms and wavy arms which stretch into the sky. Deciduous, they drop their leaves to look like naked wrinkled beggars stretching out in supplication in the savannah winter. You can imagine them travelling at night across the land, searching out naughty children, snatching them into their tangled limbs, squeezing the life out of the naughtiest and scaring the shit out of the rest. I predict few problems with children being naughty in the Kimberley, for I am told boabs can slither with remarkable pace and silently at that. I have heard they can hunt in packs. Not only for children for that matter. I camped under a boab along the Barnett River and swear to this day it tried to stick one of its tentacles into my tent. When I woke there were two boabs closer-by than they seemed to have been when the sun went down. They watched me make a cup of tea, yet when I swung around to catch them out they looked away.

Boabs are found also in Africa and Madagascar. Exactly the same, only they are called baobabs, where they grow tall and wide. Some of these trees are old, as in more than two thousand years for the biggest of them. Impervious in the main to fire they survive, white blossom flowers in the late summer to produce the biggest nuts, so big that it takes animals to eat them and break them down for propagation—that or fire.

Are these boabs survivors of the split of the family that was Gondwanaland sixty-five million years ago? Have they flourished on in Australia's journey north into the the topics to push up the Himalayas? Well, the landscape would suggest it. Travel in the Kimberley is eerily like travel in the broken country of Botswana and Zambia, with rocky outcrops of limestone and sandstone called kopjes, the same savannah vegetation, and the same boabs. Being in the Kimberley is like being in Africa, only no giraffes. In fact you expect to see them around the next corner. Instead we see dingoes, emu and roos and crows.

In the evenings the bats and the owls take over for the night-shift, for everything that flies or crawls or swims or burrows will be hunted 24/7 with no time off for good behaviour. Good behaviour is a successful hatching, a 'roo whose joey survives the dingoes, an echidna that eats enough termites for strength to propagate, a dingo who finds a mate, a freshie whose eggs hatch close enough to the water to survive the Wet.

Fresh water crocodiles are bloody clever. They have been around the Kimberley since time out of mind. In fact there might already have been freshies when the Gondwana family decided to split, for freshies have been on inland waterways forever, living in the gorges and along the banks of creeks hundreds of miles from the sea. Apart from doing what crocs do—as in lie on the banks and smile while they contemplate eating something—you maybe, they understand two things really well.

The first is temperature. Lay your eggs in the river bank at 29 degrees Celsius and you will have female babies. Thirty-one degrees, you will have males. So the mother croc digs test bores in the

river bank to assess the temperature and when the time is right, she lays her eggs as she wishes, or as millions of years of lessons have taught her to do.

The second clever thing is to predict the weather. When she digs her nest she knows what the state of the river will be when her eggs hatch in eighty-four days' time. In fact it is that which tells her where to lay her eggs. Now that's forecasting. Rains like last year, she will build her nest not too far from the current bank. A huge Wet on its way and she will plod way over to the far bank and lay them so they will not be washed away in the floods, but close enough to the river to scurry down the bank to the relative safety of the water when they hatch. We can learn a lot from crocs. If she predicts a drought she doesn't go far at all for her nest. Cattle station owners should all have one as a pet. Or road train drivers. Be nice to know that the eighty thousand litres of diesel destined for Mt Barnett Roadhouse will not be held up by flooded fords on the Gibb River Road in three months' time.

So how did all this come about? Nobody in their right mind would have thought a croc intelligent, and yet they knock long-range weather forecasters for a six, consigning them to the realm of bone scattering or tea leaf reading. We are in the Geikie Gorge, part of the mighty Fitzroy River. It will be many months before the river flows to the sea again. Not only do freshies in this gorge know how big the rains will be, but they predict the state of the river on their part of the river bank where their eggs are laid, which is several hundred clicks downstream from up Kunanurra way where the real rains fall. That's survival for you. [1]

Then I start thinking about other animals and their understanding of the forces of nature. If all the pheasants at Pateke Lagoons start chook-chook-chooking at the same time they are predicting one of our many earthquake tremors. Sure enough one will follow. Same with horses—they all start running around and bucking—tremor follows. Seagulls flying inland tell me that bad weather is coming. Tuis doing their evening call in the morning tells me rain is on the way. If we have pied stilts nosing around our lagoons for nesting points I know that they know there is going to be a drought, sufficient for them to nest close to the safety of the water's edge. But how do they know? Brain the size of a split pea but they only nest here in drought years.

My years in the mountains taught me to read the sky for weather and I can sense when rain is coming. I sort of understand the el nino-la nina patterns, or at least the relationships between ocean currents and air temperatures. But this is educated thinking, book learning. Maybe when we have been around for sixty or seventy million years we might have the same intuition.

I am told freshies are more wary of you than you them. I don't press the point. Further north, just a couple of days ago a man fishing for barramundi in the Mary River in the Kakadu was taken from his tinnie—his wife at the bow. Yes, it was a saltie, but a croc anyhow. Thank all stars that it is winter and the snakes are hibernating.

[1.] Mind you, freshies are reducing in numbers due to the invasion of their habitat by cane toads. The freshies die from the poison in the toad when it is eaten. Salties, however, chew away happily, and I am happy about that because cane toads are an abomination creeping over WA at the rate of thirty clicks a year, fouling pools and stream and creeks and killing off untold species. Thanks Queensland, for importing them from Hawaii in 1935 to eat the native grey backed cane beetle which was threatening the sugar cane crops. Trouble was the cane toad liked all kinds of other prey in its new ecological niche, especially bugs and skinks and eggs, and if it gets eaten the poison at the back of its head kills the animal anyway. Now they are found in the Kimberley in eighty short years. The Rangers at the Bungle Bungles collected more than 40,000 of them between April and June of this year! The Bungle Bungles are two thousand kms inland across deserts from the Cane Coast! They have been known to hitch rides in trailers, on road trains, in the boots of cars.

The Gibb River Road

When I was a kid we had a Readers Digest World Atlas. Matter of fact I've still got it. An Australian publication, it focussed on the Lucky Country. I poured over the maps, sometimes with my father, who had never been there, although he went to Norfolk Island late in life with Mum. Top of the scrutiny-list was the north and west and desert lands of Australia. That is where I learned about the Gibb River Road. It was a scratch on the map, its dotted lines telling of the Wet. I had read a Town Like Alice by Neville Shute, well, all his books actually, so I knew about the Wet and cattle country.

Even the road to Broome from Perth was pretty much dashes on the map of WA. The road showed Broome as a big town, with Derby and Wyndham the only towns of note, although I see Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek were there in small print but Kunanurra is not. Such names for a wide-eyed kid! Broome, a pearl town with a chequered past and bombed by the Japanese just a few years before; Derby and Wyndham, cattle towns with freezing works at either end of the Gibb River Road, which was built for cattle drives.

All this was embellished by my grandfather who had been to Broome. He regaled me with stories of camels carting freight overland before the Gibb was built, and pearl divers from all over Asia in heavy brass helmets getting the bends. He even bought my grandma a pearl which she would show me on request.

So the idea of five weeks in a 4WD Camper in the Kimberley definitely appealed. First up was the Gibb River Road, built to transport cattle to the ports and for farm supplies—800 kms of rough road full of sand and potholes and corrugations and jump-ups, whatever they were.

From the air, **Broome** is an oasis on a sandy beach in a huge bay where blue sky and blue sea converge. My eyes are drawn to a strip of white sandy beach bordered by an endless plain of red savannah. The mind sends a message that heat can be expected which is just what you get on the tarmac. The town is small, maybe 15,000 on a good day, and many fewer in the Wet, when it virtually closes down. It is like Port Douglas used to be, but more battered, for this is a town with a rough and ready past. It is a cyclone town with warnings all over and the houses have got that Top End battened-down look about them. Rooves are rusty corrugated iron, mostly unpainted. Frangipani trees along the road sides make for very pleasant walking.

On a Saturday afternoon the township is empty as a pocket—shops closed. Only the Roebuck Bay Hotel is open, the quintessential outback boozier, patrons out on the verandah smoking, races inside on the TV, hubble-bubble of rough men telling rough jokes in shorts and joddies or thongs, however no shirt no service, as in we have standards. No humbugging, either, although Geoff and I never quite work out what humbugging is—maybe begging? Three huge bars. Wet T-shirt comps on Thursday and Sundays, open mic on Tuesdays, bands Friday through Sunday nights, this week The Sombreros. The Roey goes off, mate. We stay there two nights. Run down but wonderful, the burger food is tasty and generous, and Sunday is a roast so get in early, mate. So says Gerhardt, the Swiss guy temping in the garden bar as he pours me a pint of Emu.

We wander around the town on an deserted Sunday, a small market selling what all small markets sell, a crowd of indigenous people sitting under trees in the park. There has been a knifing there overnight but the town takes this news in its stride. There is a large regional prison with an even larger police station across the road. It is hot and we stick to the shady side of the street. Cable Beach by bus for the obligatory sunset, and you can see why. Takes you by surprise because the sun goes down so fast. By 5.20pm it's all over but the twenty minutes before that are quite

breath taking—the sun sinking below the sea giving off indigoes and magentas not to mention oohs and aahs.

The bus driver is Robyn. She is in shorts, singlet and thongs. In her forties, she came up from Perth for three months and is still here twelve years later. She is affable, her face lined by sunny days. She drops us off at the Roey—now don't you boys get into any trouble in there.

Next day we pick up the Dreamliner—Toyota Hilux Camper with pop-top and everything we need for a 4WD adventure. With only a double bed for two good mates but not that friendly, we also have a tent and an air mattress. Dieseled up, food and grog, spare water. No road trip can be undertaken without a wok so we buy one from Yuen Wing which is a General Store worth going to Broome for on its own. An overnight shake-down cruise on the red sands to Cape Leveque and we are ready for the Gibb.

Driving distances are huge in the Kimberley with not much in between, and not much traffic on the roads either. Working out where the Roadhouses are and at what intervals becomes the first task of the day so we know we will always have spare diesel just in case we break down—all the books, and indeed the rental agency [who provide us ominously with a satellite beacon—use in emergency—stay with your truck no matter what!] makes it clear you can go for days without vehicles if you are on remote 4WD roads.

Derby is a down-at-heel village of maybe 4,000. HQ of the Shire of Derby, two campgrounds, a really good information centre, a regional prison, a hotel built fifteen years ago for two bus-loads at a time but it looks like they never arrived, an extended wharf built for the cattle trade and the freezing works, neither of which still happen, two roadhouses. Accommodation in Derby is at a premium because of the FIFO's who fly in to work at the Refugee Detention Centre down the road in Curtin, and then fly out after their month-long stint. The only tangible result seems to be a new butchery and superette opposite the Shell roadhouse.

We fetch up at the Kimberley Campground as there are NO CAMPING signs everywhere. We even do some laundry. Our camp backs onto an endless floodplain without so much as a mound on the horizon. The camp quickly fills up as the travellers call it a day. One side of us, two young couples from Brisbane who have just finished the Gibb—rough but beaut—and on the other, four women from Melbourne travelling together with Aussie swags, a table and some chairs, stove and billy. They are heading for Cape Leveque.

Lloyd Mulrone is a retired builder from the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He bought his Chev Impala 46 years ago second-hand. Red and white two tone, used to have white walls. Weighs three tonnes. Bastard who sold it to him took the V8 out and replaced it with a six cylinder job, but he drove it anyway for 425,000 miles waiting for it to conk out. When it did he put in a V8 that had only done 110,000 miles, so the guy said, and that was in 1989. Same block today but new everything else .

Lloyd's house is a bell tent he bought in 1980, green canvas. His freezer is in the back seat, but the bastard broke down and he is waiting at the campground for a part from Perth, he doesn't know how long. Had to give the fucken lot away, mate; peas, beans, steak, sausages, chops; had enough in the bastard to last me three months.

The rest of Lloyd's world is on a double-axle long trailer which used to carry his building stuff. A wooden table, spare car parts, spare gas bottle and diesel, generator, stove, work bench, tools, more tools, welder, four spare tires, spare axle and diff, four hubs that might come in handy and a spare windscreen. He sits at his station midway down the trailer, khaki shorts and singlet, rolls his smokes,

does his cooking and chats with the campers. He paces himself with four cans each night before bed. He is as skinny as a rake. He's not sure when he will go home, but he needs to get back to fire up his 1960 Cadillac De Ville. To this day he's not sure why he bought it. Twelve days later as we reach the main road out from the Bungle Bungles, we see Lloyd barrelling up the Great North Road heading for Kunanurra and home. Part must have arrived, then.

Norman is the Derby taxi driver. His wife, Molly, works at Woollies. They have their own caravan in the camp grounds. Molly was at a loose end so she popped in to see if there was some part time checkout work. She ended up being the full time baker. She starts at 4am so Norman does the early shift on the cabs. They are from Brisbane and came for up to two years. He has a bit of a prostate problem so will go back to Brizzy for that, but he'll have to shift their son out of the house they recently built. The son has been looking after it for them, but he still sends them the power bills. Norman retired from his tow truck business which his son now runs, and he knows all the callout costs like the back of his hand. Insurance companies are bastards, out to rook the towies, but not him. He's way ahead of those bastards. By the way, don't worry about the Derby roadhouses having competition for fuel prices. Both of them are owned by the same bloke, but his daughter runs one of them. It takes Norman less than ten minutes to fill us in on his life.

We have come to Derby to visit the Horizontal Waterfalls. It has cost a month's pension so we will enjoy it come what may. And we do. Amphibious planes fly to Buccaneer Archipelago right over the limestone bluffs and rha landscape of the west Kimberley, with their drowned and sunken valleys whose narrow walls get eaten out at their weak points to break through from the sea and surge at waterfall speed in and out twice a day.

We fly over the waterfalls and land at the houseboats, board a fifteen metre boat with three 300 horse Yamahas, does fifty knots, we fly through the narrow gaps at high speed down and up down and up. We swim in a shark cage and watch tawny nurse sharks being fed. They suck food in with a loud snap, which is faintly disgusting. We go for a scenic trip to look at mangroves and beautiful limestone cliffs which make the Kimberley. We have a barramundi BBQ lunch.

Ella is in her late twenties, she works 12 days on and three off for eight months of the year. She loves her work and never gets sick of it. Christian, Sandra and Bryne (who can only whisper, and all the women hang on his every word cos he is drop-dead gorgeous and young,) live aboard the main houseboat as well. Up to twenty people stay per night in considerable luxury.

We figure six flights a day at fourteen people a time at \$700 is \$60,000 a day, three seaplanes and a shitload of gear. Family firm and a slick operation with great people. It is a brilliant experience and you will be well looked after. Go there before you die.

Boabs mark the start of the **Gibb River Road**. For five kms road signs tell you all you need to know about safety and then some. The road stretches red and flat in front of us, termite mounds at random intervals. After a while small hills drift onto our horizon. We gradually reach the beautiful savannah country with outcrops strangely like Botswana. The limestone ranges were thrust up in Devonian times, lots of fossils in the narrow gorges.

The road conditions are nowhere near as bad as we have been told, like being at home, but the Dreamliner takes it all in his stride. It is early days

We visit deep narrow gorges where water has sliced into limestone reefs. The river is dry in places but in the pools we see fresh water crocodiles, which puts us off swimming.

A rough fifty km track through lovely valleys with four fords through tree-lined pools brings us to Mt Hart Station campground.

Names Brian, with hand out at arrival. Brian and Julia are Queenslanders from Briszy and exude Queensland hospitality. There is a bar which is open when you want it to be and the beer (Crown lager) is a creditable \$9 given the transport cost . They come up from late April to October each year and love the lifestyle. They also run a five star accommodation and restaurant unit for fly-ins which is most nights for up to twenty people. These are all up-market travel clients who like to stay in remote locations, mostly unreachable by road. Nice!

Brian and Julia are the camp caretakers for 350,000 hectares of what used to be a cattle station. It is now part of King Leopold National Park. It has an airstrip for the flying doctor among other things, its own waterhole and superb campsites in a minimalist kind of way. Wild cattle wander through the camp as does a golden dingo.

This is where we meet Barry and Kathy, grey nomads from Rockhampton. Barry has a regular bread-making contest with Bruce, from Gladstone, who they see every now and then on the track. Dunno who won but they had a hell of a scoring system. Barry has never won yet, but he is better at netting yabbies. Not sure about Bruce who is on his fifth tour to the Kimberley but he had his bucket fire glowing just right early-on and his dutch oven was covered in coals. He referred to Shirley but I never spotted her.

Full moon, crickets, ghost gums, night birds, bats, stars, campers cooking over fires, the murmur of amiable conversation, glasses of wine. Everything that the Gibb should be, is.

An easy run to Bell Gorge, where Geoff goes for a stroll to the waterfalls and a swim. Tonight a stay at Silent Grove campsite, with minimal facilities, a toilet and a water point . We camp under a gum tree. Roof popped up, tent up, chairs and table set up, gas connected to cooker, relax. All this takes less than ten minutes. Above us are cooing galahs, one of which shits on Geoff's clean T shirt just as he is reaching for his beer.

Diane and Ken have just retired and are on their first shake-down tour. They hail from Adelaide, and are heading for Broome for R&R in a motel. Diane is very keen on this! Ken is a rugby fanatic, originally from Wallington, NSW, same as Phil Kearns. Ken's been working in logistics, organising trucking bulk wine from Margaret River to the Barossa. He has a CB radio so he can listen to the truckies. Diane wants a squizz inside the Dreamliner and declares it perfect. Dreamliner purrs contentedly. Their rented camper-trailer has a full size double bed which slides out into their tent from a rack below the floor of the trailer. It is a work of art. The whole thing take seven minutes to pack up.

Ten days later we pull into a lonely campsite ten kms down a red sandy track from the Great North Highway to Barn Hill Station, on Eighty Mile Beach. It is a minimalist camp crammed full of people who have moved there for the winter. One bloke plants bok choy every two days in his little garden of red sand for his greens. Nearest shop is Roebuck Plains Roadhouse (140km) or Broome (a further 53km) All are happy and settled in for a long haul. They have knitting circles, barbecues, bring and buys, library swaps, parties and knees-ups. There is nothing there but a beach and some fishing, but it is cheap and gas is supplied to the cookhouse. Many caravans have three or more awnings around them and most have satellite TV, with their cables dug under the track to the other side of the sandy track. There we met our friends Ken and Diane from Silent Grove. They are on their way back to Adelaide. We drive through looking for a campsite and the yell, ' Hey! Kiwi.' brings us to a halt, Ken

with a beer in his hand. They have splashed out at Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm at Cape Leveque, and bought Diane a set of pearl earrings. Diane is purring.

Back on the track we pull in at Imintje, an outback store, one of only two on the Gibb with diesel. They also have great coffee, roo pies and dry goods.....and, lo and behold wifi via satellite, as there are no telephones on the Gibb. Unbelievably I manage to download my emails, and also to book and pay for campsites at the Bungle Bungles in a week's time.

On through the savannah to Girvan's Gorge where we can swim. Just before that we see a sign for Over the Range Repairs owned by the legendary Neville who can fix anything and is the sole succour for mishaps on the Gibb. We laugh gaily, knowing the Dreamliner will not need him today. We stop at Mt Barnett Roadhouse to refuel, the last diesel before Wyndham, 500 clicks away, but we have plenty. Here, the Gibb Road is a mass of sharp stones that are hard to avoid. We reach Barnett River Gorge, a free camp site along the river's edge. We find a spot to camp on the river side only to find we have a flat tire in the making. Without any handbook for the Hilux we struggle to get the spare tire off its roost. No problem. Justin turns up in his Landcruiser and changes it for us. He has just married Pepper, who stays in the truck. They are on the second day of their honeymoon, Kimberley-style. From Broome, born and bred, making their way slowly to El Questro for some serious glamour camping. Justin oozes Aussie competence. No worries, old fellas, you have a great time. They wander off to find their own piece of paradise. We see their fire started and the billy on within ten minutes, smoke drifting back to us through the ghost gums.

The Dreamliner slides guiltily back up the Gibb for 70km for a chat with Neville. Nev comes out of his shed, hand outstretched, the other around a VB in a cooler, a hat that has seen much better days, shorts and a singlet that might have been yellow once. He wears joddies with no socks. His handshake betrays the creases on his callouses. He has everything set up for repairs in the bush—generator, tire machine and a roof overhead but without sides. Mate, we can help you, no worries. Where are you from? Ah, Kiwis, land of the Double-down burger! Had quite a few Kiwis drop in over the last week or so.

Nev is recently married, baby due in December in the middle of the Wet, lives in the back of beyond, 28 km from Mt Barnett Roadhouse, which with a population of 22 ain't no metropolis! Been in the Kimberley nineteen years, twelve of them in Imintje, but too noisy so he's just moved up here! In the Wet he does maintenance and repairs and goes on holiday. I hope he does well. In a way I hope the Gibb never gets tar-sealed as it would ruin him. Even if you don't need to, call in and see him. He will know who you are when you do!

Nev says the tire is what they call in the Kimberley, fucked. He congratulates us on a fine job of it. He points to his rack of new tires. We nod—and thank our lucky stars we took the unlimited tire insurance. \$385 later we are on our way with much thanks to Nev who is a good bastard and will see you right.

Pleasant night under the stars in the free camp with the Barnett River gurgling alongside us, and an early start for the end of the Gibb. Cattle country with grids maybe every eighty kms, bones bleached at the side of the road—the ones that didn't beat the road trains. A huge grader train trundles the other way belching smoke, sand and dust. Grader, wooden caravan with smoking chimney, diesel tank, outhouse, and Hilux in train. Fully self-contained. I guess once he gets to one end he starts back again. We do notice that the corrugations have stopped and thank the gradie for it.

A stopover for compulsory tea and scones at Mt Elizabeth Station breaks our day as we make our way immersed in the savannah scenery until the crossing of the Pentecost River. A ford about a third of a km, water to the top of our wheels. We cross in low third—to the left, saltwater estuary and nasty crocs—to our right, fresh water and less nasty crocs. Sign at the edge of the river says DO NOT LEAVE YOUR VEHICLE IF STRANDED. Safely across the Pentecost, we soon reach the blacktop and cruise along at 110km, having been through a thousand floodways, numerous fords, and corrugations that would addle your brain over time. The Gibb. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

We reach **Wyndham**, check in to a boab-studded caravan park, bird feeders hanging from the trees to bring in the parakeets. We follow the road to Wyndham's claim to fame—a stunning sunset from Five Rivers Lookout. Enormous rivers that stretch valley wall to valley wall in the Wet, but are now meanders within them in the Dry. The landscape around Wyndham is awesomely flat interspersed by massive uplifts of purple rock.

As the sun drops we open a beer and watch the passing parade. The Lookout has free gas barbecues, which is common throughout WA. People cook their dinners, have a beer, chat among themselves. The police arrive and natter to the people, mention that there is no camping at the Lookout and are you booked into the Wyndham campground, and is that your first or second beer? He has a bent nose and a no nonsense smile. She wears an akubra police hat and a gun, an open smile, loves coming up here for the sunset as it make such a change. Wyndham is a hardship posting. She's from Albany way down south—loves the Kimberley, drive safely now.

Gordon and Liz have just arrived. They have driven up with their caravan from Adelaide and are exhausted. They were only allowed four days in Northern Territory otherwise their parrot would have been put in quarantine for a month. They used to have nine cats. Then they had five dogs, but they wanted to travel the nomad life, so just keep the one parrot now. You'd think the Northern Territory government would take pet parrots into account. Polly wouldn't hurt a fly and she has all her vaccination certificates. But no, the inspector at the Territory border just wasn't interested. Four days to get to Kunanurra! That was it! Then we had to dump all our fruit and veges at the West Australia border for their quarantine, and we'd just stocked up at Katherine. More rules and regs than there used to be at home in Birmingham. Mind you, Polly was allowed to come into WA, no worries. Not going back through the Territory. We'll take the Nullabor instead.

Wyndham is a small town fallen on lean times with the meat works gone, replaced to some extent by livestock shipments to Darwin, pop 900, a rundown outback town. There is an iron mine 120 km away which feeds the port so the road trains thunder through the night at seven minute intervals. They have a four-dollie system that enables a tractor unit with four trailers at around thirty tons per trailer. We work out that adds up to 230,000 tons a week being exported via lighters to bigger ships further out in the estuary.

Reuben is from Sydney, early fifties, travelling on his own. He has three weeks to do the North and Northwest of Australia in his Hilux. He mostly stays in dongas in the campgrounds so he doesn't have to put his tent up each night. The cabins are cheap and cheerful. This morning he has bought a kilo of prawns from Gazza's Prawn Shack down by the shore. The camp kitchen has a steamer just for this purpose. He passes over the basket, no way he can eat all these, mate. He's come to the Kimberly up through the middle. Bloody near got wiped out on the Tanami by some mad bastard trying to pass a road train. Sick of travelling, and possibly being on his own, his eyes a little red-rimmed, Reuben's heading for El Questro Resort on the Gibb to put his feet up for a few days.

Wyndham is also a fuel terminal, with the cheapest diesel for a thousand kms--\$1.50 a litre, so we fill up, and stock up a little in a true outback General Store. We have been paying \$2.90 on the Gibb.

We are in billabong country on the mighty Ord River delta and that means birds, so we go across country to Parry Lagoons National Wetlands, not well-marked, well, not the way we went anyway. We see brolgas in the distance which are large cranes, and a lot more waders and divers and scavengers. For this is migration heaven for waterfowl. The Marigu Billabong, an oxbow on the Ord River floodplain, has open water year-round so attracts masses of birds, but during the last of the Dry it is standing room only in the only fishing hole for miles. Jabiru plunge their long beaks into mud in search of yabbies; magpie geese—well it's hard to know what geese do other than shit everywhere and make a lot of noise; pelicans soar and hover and drift and ski onto the water, long beaks dragging for anything alive to eat, rising en masse if a single bird is seen to catch something a hundred metres away; spoonbills see-saw their heads in the mud for taddies; egrets stab the mud and the water's edge for bugs; grebes carry their babies around on their back; dozens of species of duck dabble like synchronised swimmers on practise night; cormorants hang their wings out in the branches, sharp beaks and sharper eyes on the lookout; swamp hens screech exactly like pukekos, for this is where ours have come from; and the lotus birds high-step it from one water lily to the next before they sink. In the Okavango Delta they are called Jesus-birds.

Not to mention the budgies and seed eaters that hang about any wetland. Or the corellas, cockatoos and galahs that flock around just for the sake of it. Swallows and martens dive and swoop for flies and midges and mosquitos.

At Marigu Billabong there is an excellent bird-hide which allows the birder to get up close and personal. So close that when a six foot freshie swims casually under the hide you get a feeling from your toes that they do not want to be there. As the croc glides out on the other side its tail swishes slowly one way and swashes the other, having moved three metres in the process. Turtles scurry as best they can into the reeds. A cormorant emerges with a fish in its beak. Twice it throws the fish up, the second time it lands longwise in its beak and goes down the hatch with a lumpening of throat.

There is an eggy fecundity to these wetlands, gathering together in their millions for protection of the species in the same way birds do to escape the rolling horror that is a croc. Eggs float everywhere, cling onto leaves, to stalks, on the back of diving birds, or drift in stringy bubbles on the surface in the race between hatched and dispatched.

Half a mile away from the billabong it is savannah again—back to the crows, the hawks and the eagles, the odd magpie, corellas returning to their roosting trees, termites on their ceaseless construction of a bigger home, the flies.

A screeching above me as as a thousand cockatoos fly overhead in the first of many forays to find a suitable roost for the night. At the Parry Creek Farm campsite we are surrounded by boabs and birds, finches, corellas, cockatoos, more finches. Wallabies come out in the dusk. The campsite is in the middle of the 36,000 hectare Parry Wetlands, a RAMSAR world heritage site. This is bird heaven for me.

Anne and Terry have owned Parry Farm Resort for eighteen years and are ready to go back to Perth. The place is for sale. They've had one or two nibbles, but a wetland in the back of beyond which you can't get out of for much of the Wet is not everyone's view of a great lifestyle. They hope that a consortium of regulars might pitch in to keep it going. Terry was one of the builders in Tom Price in the sixties, putting up prefabricated Beazley Homes from New Zealand. They got interested in birds so sold their roadhouse near Bunbury and moved to the Kimberley. Terry and Anne look like they've had enough, the joy has gone out of it. Tonight, as with every Tuesday, the cafe serves barramundi and chips. Even paradise palls with familiarity.

Kunanurra, pop around 6,000, is a pleasant irrigation town established in 1960 for the Ord River Project, forming Lake Argyle and watering close to a million hectares, with cropping on an industrial scale. The water comes during the Wet in torrents. Up here you name it they grow it, from rice and sugar cane to sandalwood for oils, perfumes and religious incense of all varieties. It is a hiring town going by the number of signs at gates of crop farms—hiring tractor drivers and pickers—not hiring until August—not hiring just now. Road trains dominate the highway. The town is a happy stopover between Darwin and Broome with a busy airport, also the HQ for East Kimberley for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. By the number of light planes flying in and out, it is also the shopping centre for a large number of cattle stations and their families. Five campgrounds are a sign of the newest industry—servicing the needs of the grey nomads, who are there in their hundreds to stock up and spend a few days in civilisation, wash their laundry, visit the library to get onto the internet. For the men it is barra fishing. All the fishing shops have goofy photos of giant barramundi and red-faced men trying to hold them up.

The bottle shop at Coles opens at twelve, with a queue. There is a drinking problem here, so local shire rules restrict purchases to a slab of beer, or six bottles of wine, or a single bottle of spirits, with one transaction per day per account. Whilst it is an imposition on the grey nomads, they can always go to the other bottle shop and use their husband's credit card for the second purchase. For the locals, the majority of whom are indigenous people, they are restricted to 24 cans of beer or a bottle of rum a day, seven days a week. Hard to know if this works, judging by the numbers of layabouts, black and white, sitting in parks drinking grog. On the other hand, there are plenty of indigenous families with new or near new Land Cruisers who are clearly holding down well-paying jobs, with well-dressed kids. In general, Kunanurra has a prosperous feel to it. Everyone wears broad brimmed hats.

Right next door to the town is a hidden valley, Mirima National Park, close and secluded and echoey with ancient crumbling red and black striated rock and sacred sites, rock wallabies and giant boab trees thousands of years old. The boabs with their big pulpy fruit, watery wood, shiny trunks have arms that stick up in riotous angles like entings. I see them traveling across the savannah at night, they so totally look like children's sketches of humans or at least pre-humans. Mirima National Park is a nit-dreaming site. Every living and non-living thing has its own dreaming. I have already had at least one boab-dreaming and intend to move on to bats.

Sitting in the carpark at a shady table listening to the birds and the faint sound of people walking quietly in the bush is a peace hard to find and worth the trip for this alone. At a park table close-by two kids are doing their diaries and sketching a boab fruit for their homework book. A few kilometres away is agriculture on a giant scale with tractors that make a D9 look tiny, watered by a man-made lake that is sixty times the size of Sydney Harbour.

Don't be put off by the 70km dusty bumpy track into the **Bungle Bungles**. It is only two hours out of your life to have a life experience. Simply put, the Bungle Bungles take you by surprise at every turn, every viewpoint. We camp at Walardi Campsite which had to be booked ahead of time. It is basic with a toilet and water points only. It fills quickly in the afternoons. We meet our friends Barry and Kathy once more, who are on their way back to Rocky. We visit the Picannini and Cathedral Gorges and I have a short walk in the heat of the afternoon. Geoff meets two rangers carrying a large plastic bucket of cane toads, part of their losing battle to keep them out of the park. They have picked up more than forty thousand of them since April.

From the air the Bungle Bungles are magnificent. The domes look like jaffas and chocolates, layers on layers, but half melted. Basically this is red sandstone being eroded away by wind from the

Tanami Desert next door, which is why most of the erosion faces east. But also it is eroded by the Wet when water trickle down fissures to make gorges that are squeeze-narrow in places. A unique and ancient species of palm tree clings to these fissures growing twenty five metres high, way up on the cliff faces.

Gradually the domes are eroding away and will be gone in twenty million years or so. Which means the chopper business will have to find an alternative source of income. The flight is exhilarating, in a tiny Robbie 47 with no doors and a teenage pilot, well maybe twenty-one.

You hear a strange bird call in the Bungle Bungles, from around dusk until a little after the sun goes down, usually close to camp sites. We didn't see it, but its call is weird. As one starts calling, others respond from a distance. The responses don't appear to be in any sort of unison. Rather there are different versions of the same theme—often a light repetition of quick clicks, almost metallic. Then things will quieten down for a time, only to be raised elsewhere, a fast repetition, sometimes three, usually four, a few five-clicks, but seemingly never more than five.

As the cockatoos fly over for their last raucous race for a particular branch on a particular tree, although they are often not sure of the particulars, the clicking slows and ceases as dazzlingly beautiful sunsets and indigos herald nightfall. The Walardi camp goes quiet and the Spatula Bird creeps away to its nest until the next evening. I dream I'm David Attenborough.

Wolfe Creek Crater

At 15 km per second or 54,000 km per hour the 50,000 ton chunk of alien rock was always gonna land heavily. When it did it land it gouged 120 metres through Aussie rock to come to a halt in a storm force rain of molten rock, liquefying everything in its path for an 800 metre diameter. The shockwave must have been enormous, flattening everything for miles and miles. Chunks of it have been found 10 km away.

At that speed, which is 90 times the speed of sound, you wouldn't have heard it coming, or you would've been a minute dead before you knew about it. A silent whoompah with the force of a dozen nukes. After the dust settled the magnetic pole took a slight deviation. On the basis that lightning never lands twice in the same place we feel quite safe camping out, but in any case we wouldn't know if it did.

What you do get after the 200 metre climb is a fantastic view of the crater, but also of the vast Tanami Desert and the start of the Canning Stock Route. It's a long way to go to look at a hole in the ground but do it, anyway.

The Pilbara

From the Tanami Track to Halls creek is all red dust and thirty km straights. Every now and then a road train pulls into sight. Which-ever way it's heading it's a good time to pull off the road. First, he is not going to stop for you. Second, the dust will take minutes to settle. Third, he probably will overtake you. When he overtakes you can only feel pity for the poor cattle in the third train unit as the dust is complete. When he comes the other way his dust blanks out the sky and you can see nothing. And it may also be that he has just passed another road train so being off the road until the way is clear is the only option. Road train drivers wear joddies, shorts, singlet. They have long hair in pony tails and long beards. You don't fuck with them, they leave you alone. Loners.

Onto the blacktop and heading for Fitzroy Crossing, a dusty rusty crossing and a good camping site. It has clouded over and the heat is intense. I shower with my clothes on and air dry...twice. Two loads of dirty washing done, we kick back and relax, a curry.

Next tent over are some people we met in the Bungle Bungles. They have retired from the army engineer life for the quiet of Cooks Beach, and a sister who worked with Geoff in Zimbabwe. They are on their way back to Broome and home with a tinge of regret, although Pauline does claim that she is more of an El Questro lady than a fly camping girl. She prefers the glamping.

Next day on the road for a two-day 850km push to Karajini NP near Tom Price in the Pilbara. The trip is mostly refuelling stops with not a single Roadhouse selling anything other than instant coffee, so Geoff struggles through the day. We arrive at Dales Gorge and camp on rock for two nights. Red rocks, slit-thin gorges, pools, ancient, ore-laden ochre. By now I am gorged out. Seeing most of the Kimberley gorges and half the others elsewhere has left me full of knowledge but over-loaded on the imagery.

Even though the road trains are a hazard the highways are virtually empty. On a 560km trek west to the Coral Coast, we see only road trains and Grey Nomads. We pass not a single house other than Roadhouses. The land goes from red and craggy to red and flat to red and flatter to sandy and flat until there is a 360degree flat horizon of endless low sand dunes which have turned into sandstone. This is the Pilbara. It is beautiful in a wild windy serene way. There are no trees, just spinifex, with acacias in the hollows where the rain has cut through. When it rains, it pours, and when it hits the ground it can't seep anywhere but downhill because the sandstone is impervious and down it goes in flash floods to reach either the sea, or to evaporate in salt pans.

It is not uncommon to drive 40 km in a straight line with no traffic at all. The Pilbara is a lonely place, not even many birds. It's also big even by Aussie standards, gigantic mine site with gear taller than apartment buildings, men and women driving them in fluoro-colours, with the leathery skin of dust and smokes, which everyone appears to do.

No surprise then that Exmouth, too, is dead flat steppe country. With it comes the coast wind, which makes world renowned surfing breaks. Exmouth is a military town, its origin being the Ultra-Low Frequency Station where navy personnel can hear whales belch across the other side of the Indian Ocean, but not crashing airliners, it seems. The sea nearby is also dotted with oil and gas rigs and ocean going tankers taking West Shore fuel to market in Korea.

Ningaloo and Cape Range have coral reefs, and whales and all manner of watery creatures that you can see by getting into the water, which we do. Recent floods have torn the road up in places and

there is a critical shortage of campsites, but ours at the Vlamingh Lighthouse is great. It is heady being by the sea again.

We settle in at Coral Bay for a few days. It's a laid-back tourist oasis with a boat ramp, two campgrounds, a grocery, cafe and three tour offices offering diving of every conceivable kind. There are whale sharks, manta rays and myriad fish and corals. The caravan park is packed. It is a busy, chirpy, tree-lined squeeze of a place. People smile.

A Chinese couple are camped next door, twenties, with a double swag staked out alongside their Toyota Landcruiser, which is fully set up for the bush. They are Justin and Sally, both born in Perth, he's a veg and fruit buyer for his family's five IGA stores, she's a freight forward agent. They are as Aussie as.

Behind us are four young women traveling together in a Toyota Hiace van, and tents the same as ours and every-one else's, the ubiquitous little Ozzie Cross-Breeze bell tent.

People read at the laundry waiting for clothes or a machine, four washing lines are full, including mine with nice clean sheets and towels. A woman in her eighties joins me at the line. She is wearing thongs, shorts and a singlet. She's been here a week and will stay for three more.

On the glass bottom boat out at the reef Gary and Louise frantically try to control three boys. Carrot tops, five, seven and nine, they live in Coff's Harbour with their mum and are here on holiday with dad. They go for a swim off the boat, with a harness line for each boy, two for Gary. Louise is dazed from the strain. The crew guide talks to the kids and they become total angels. She shows them turtles. Gary and Louise shake their heads in disbelief. They live in Tom Price, been there eight years. Gary is a diesel mechanic, Louise drives a scraper. They got together when the kids' mum went back to her family. Tom's not the same town it was due to the FIFOs who fly in from wherever for a month on the trot and then back home. Leaves a small town smaller with no-one wanting to live there. They will do another year and then set up a business back in NSW. Still have another week with the kids, and are driving back to Tom tomorrow so they can go to the races at Marble Bar on Saturday. Great day out. Might get up to two thousand people. Parties, a dance, get totally dressed up. All the Tom girls will wear white matadors. It's a tradition. Tom Price to Marble Bar is four hundred kilometres each way over metal roads.

Hank and Marriatt are camped on the far side of us. Hank has retired from selling Winnebago's in Perth, and has a rheumatoid arthritis problem, associated with his smoking, I'd say. He is seventy two. He arrived from the Netherlands via Perth and caught the bus to Port Hedland in 1962. Got a job in the mines there. Stayed on as a labourer over Christmas and learned to drive big gear while no one was around. He got his ticket and worked all over the Pilbara, including the Seymour Mine way out the back of beyond. He stayed for five years, got some money together and married his childhood sweetheart, Marriatt, who he shipped over from Friesland. They set up businesses in Port Hedland and Karatha before moving down to Perth. Now retired, they're taking it easy and heading north again to see friends. Their accents remain strong, but they can't stand the Dutch.... too clubby and cliquy. See themselves as dinkum Aussies, but they know a good cheese, and have four bottles of schnapps because you never know where you might get the next bottle. After two nights I get a hug from Marriatt as we part our ways.

Over on the other side of us, Chantal wears ugg boots. Hair tied back with rubber bands, gravel voice, three blondies with freckles for daughters. She herself is a sallow blonde for whom daylight seems unusual. She is round-shouldered and has a cough. She's come up from Albany for a wedding at Coral Bay. She has a second hand Oztent for four she bought for \$20, a Ford Territory with a lot of

miles, and all the family's bedding in it. Uncle Walter came over to help her put up the tent, first time she's done it.

Chantal is as hard as nails, a loud mirthless laugh she hopes will set people at ease with her, a smoker. Her relatives for the nuptials are on camping on the other side of the caravan park, although why Seychelle would marry that dickhead is beyond her. They all come over to watch the tent go up, ugg boots, or thongs, true bogans. They are noisy and garrulous. They are having a great time. They always do.

I never fucken thought I'd like this camping lark but, she says the next day. And the girls have never been out of Albany, but look at them now, phones left in the tent and a train of boys hanging their fucken tongues out. We might stay on forever. We are washing our dinner dishes at the benches by the shower block. She is drinking a laced JB, which is a Jim Beam and Coke with added JB. This is the first holiday they have had since Arsehole fucked off and she wouldn't be dead for quids, mate. Want some JB?

The wedding is to take place on the beach at 10am on the morning we leave Coral Bay, so we will miss it. Chantal has red matadors and red ugg boots for the occasion, and a green and yellow cardie. Her three girls have uggs and shorts. They have noodles for breakfast. The world is the better for Chantalle and her daughters. Aussie battlers on vacation.

Aussies! I love 'em. Open smiles, casual, not in your face but warm. Get a life story in a few minutes. They don't sweat the petty things at all. When Aussies say no worries, mate, they means it. We are more reserved, a little more polite, anxious to please, our voices go up at the end of a sentence to get a good response. Frightened of life, almost and shameful political correctness. The Aussies' big open sky and huge distances have made them big-hearted. With the Aussie, what you see is what you get. And I get it.

Peter Dale September 2014
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